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Who Was Jesus?

Who was Jesus? The recent release of Martin Scorsese's controversial movie, "The Last Temptation of Christ," has focused new attention on this age-old question. Gallup surveys show that the Scorsese portrayal of a very human Jesus differs sharply from that of the public in a number of basic respects.

A just-completed survey, The Unchurched American, 1988, conducted for Congress 88, A National Festival of Evangelism (Chicago, August 4-7), reveals that 84% of Americans believe that Jesus Christ was God or the Son of God, up from 78% a decade ago, with the uptrend most apparent among young adults, 18-29. In addition, two-thirds (66%) of Americans today say they have made a commitment to Jesus Christ, up from 60% in 1978.

Americans are overwhelmingly of the opinion that Jesus was without sin (not sinful), brave (not cowardly), emotionally stable (not unstable), had a strong (not weak) personality, and perfect (not imperfect). Americans also tend toward the view — but by less impressive margins — that Jesus was easy (rather than hard) to understand, physically strong (rather than weak), practical (rather than impractical), physically attractive (rather than unattractive), divine (rather than human), accepting (rather than demanding), warm (rather than aloof). The public was divided on whether Jesus was fun-loving or somber.

Here is the question (asked in a 1982 Gallup survey, conducted for the Robert H. Schuller Ministries), and the national results:

For each pair of words on this card, tell me the number that comes closest to the way you would describe Jesus. For example, if you consider Jesus proud, say '1', and if you consider Jesus humble, say '7'. If you consider Jesus between proud and humble, you might say '4'.

Public's Image of Jesus	Mean*
Demanding = 1 Accepting = 7	5.3
Easy to understand = 1 Hard to understand = 7	2.8
Physically strong = 1 Physically weak = 7	2.2
Brave = 1 Cowardly = 7	1.5
Warm = 1 Aloof = 7	1.5
Fun-loving = 1 Somber = 7	3.7
Impractical = 1 Practical = 7	5.8
Physically attractive = 1 Physically unattractive = 7	2.6
Emotionally stable = 1 Emotionally unstable = 7	1.5
Strong personality = 1 Weak personality = 7	1.4
Without sin = 1 Sinful = 7	1.7
Imperfect = 1 Perfect = 7	6.1
Divine = 1 Human = 7	2.5

*One-half the sample responded above and one-half responded below the mean number.

Most Appealing Character Traits

What do you consider to be the most appealing character or personality traits of Jesus? Survey respondents in the Schuller survey were also asked this question.

Some twenty character or personality traits were mentioned. Forty-one percent mentioned his "love for mankind," a response that lead all others by a 3-to-1 margin. Thirteen percent mentioned "forgiveness," 9 percent "kindness," 7 percent "compassion," and "help and guidance." "Humility," "knowledge" and "understanding," "caring," "teachings," "promise of salvation," and "everything about him is good" were mentioned by 6 percent of the respondents.

Most Important Ways to Follow Jesus

All persons in the same survey were asked what is most important if one is trying to be a follower of Jesus. Sixteen possible responses were listed. The responses most frequently mentioned were: obeying the Ten Commandments, forgiving those who have wronged you, putting others' needs before your own, and living in such a way as to draw others to Jesus. These four responses were mentioned by more than 3 in 10 of the public.

Biblically Illiterate Will Be Confused

One of the greatest concerns of critics of the film, "The Last Temptation of Christ," is that the Biblically illiterate will be confused. There is a solid basis for such concern. Gallup surveys show that only 4 in 10 know who, according to the Bible, delivered the Sermon on the Mount; fewer than half of the public are able to name the four Gospels, and three in 10 are unable to name the birthplace of Jesus.

The questions and national results (from the Schuller survey):

Who delivered the Sermon on the Mount?

Jesus	42%
Incorrect answer	24
Don't know	34
Total	100%

Will you tell me the names of the first four books of the New Testament of the Bible — that is, the four Gospels?

All 4 correct	46%
3 correct	4
2 correct	2
1 correct	2
None correct	3
Don't know	43
Total	100%

Where was Jesus born?

Bethlehem	70%
Incorrect	17
Miscellaneous	*
Don't know	13
Total	100%

*Less than one-half of one percent.

Who Do Americans Say That I Am?

By George Gallup, Jr. and George O'Connell

In this intriguing investigation the authors look at the religious values of American Christians. Drawing upon survey material collected for the Schuller organization and other groups, they go beyond mere head counting. Their goal is to ascertain how Americans percieve Jesus Christ in order to understand the impact He has on their lives.

Questions vitally important to the church were asked. Among them:

- What impact has Jesus as a moral and ethical teacher had on your life?
- Where does religion fit into your value system?
- How can the churches better serve you?
- What do you consider to be the most appealing character traits of Jesus?
- How hard have you tried to follow the example of Jesus?

Interviews with representative Americans bring the data down to earth. Additionally, church leaders from various denominations offer suggestions for infusing new life into the churches.

This intriguing book offers significant and timely information for church officials, pastors, and educators — anyone concerned with increasing the effectiveness of church ministry. Paper, $10.95.

Available at your local bookstore or direct from the publisher (please include $1.00 per book for postage and handling): THE WESTMINSTER PRESS, 925 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107.

The 1990's — Decade of 'The People's Religion'

(Speech given by George Gallup, Jr. at Religion in American Life luncheon honoring Neal Gilliatt, recipient of the 16th Annual Charles E. Wilson Award, Princeton Club, New York City, June 9, 1988.)

The title of my talk today is "The People's Religion — Americans' Faith in the 1990's," and my thesis is that, unlike any decade in history that has preceded it, the decade of the 1990's will be shaped by the people themselves — from the bottom up, if you will, rather than the top down. I would like to suggest the likely shape of religion in the 1990's, drawing upon a number of Gallup surveys, including a just-completed survey called, The Unchurched American, 1988. In this survey we repeated a number of questions we asked a decade ago, in a survey called The Unchurched American, 1978.

The 1990's will likely be the decade in which we will hear a more persistent voice from the laity, who want a greater role in the shaping of the church. The clergy appear increasingly willing to listen, but organized religion has not always listened carefully to what the laity are saying about their inner spiritual journeys. The just-completed survey, in which we compared the beliefs and lifestyles of the churched and unchurched, shows that a growing complaint, among both groups, is that churches are not helping people deal with their religious doubts and spiritual needs.

Some in the clergy tend to ignore the religious experiences of their parishioners — and many of these experiences are profound and life-changing — sometimes dismissing them as abnormal, or as sheer emotionalism. Yet these experiences are central in faith development, as we discovered in a major survey we conducted for the Religious Education Association of the United States and Canada. Indeed, a number of surveys have shown that the strongest believers are those who base their faith on experience — prayers answered, religious experiences, miracles in their lives, and so forth.

Spiritual experiences of a power outside and directing oneself are widespread — nearly half of Americans say they have had such an experience. And a consistent one-third over the years have reported they have had a "religious experience," a "moment of religious insight or awakening that changed the direction of their lives." This finding — that one-third of Americans have such breakthrough experiences — is, I believe, one of the most significant survey findings ever uncovered.

Perhaps part of the reason that experiences of this sort have not received the attention they deserve is the belief that one can reach God only through intense mental effort, through a gigantic intellectual struggle. If it were so, Christianity would surely have died out in the first or second century.

Religion in the 1990's will be increasingly shaped by the people, with the clergy, I believe, in becoming more willing to accept, and respond to, the inner spiritual journeys of people, both among the churched and unchurched. In this respect, surveys will help shape the church by giving laity a chance to be heard.

I like to feel that surveys play an important role in religion by helping to shed light on man's response to God. And from a strictly sociological point of view, surveys are important because the religious dynamic on religion in American life is often a key to attitudes and behavior in general.

When we examine religion in America through surveys we should, perhaps, do so in terms of two levels — attested belief on the one hand, and inner, transforming belief on the other.

Levels of religious belief and practice in the U.S. are extraordinarily high. For example, the large majority of Americans believe in a personal God, believe that Jesus Christ is God or the Son of God, believe their prayers are answered, and say that religion is either "very" or "fairly" important in their lives. In fact, only 4% of Americans are totally "non-religious" — that is, say religion is not at all important in their lives, do not belong to a church nor attend a church, and have no religious affiliation.

One cannot reflect upon these findings without sensing a paradox in American society — on the one hand, high levels of religious belief, and on the other, a nation where many are still homeless and impoverished, where broken families are common, where morals and ethics are continuing to decline. At times, it appears that our religion is only skin deep and that we are a nation of assenters rather than believers.

Indeed, church involvement alone does not seem to make a great deal of difference in the way we live our lives. The churched are just as likely as the unchurched, for example, to engage in unethical behavior.

It is at the level of deep religious commitment where we find extraordinary differences — in outlook, in charitable activity, in happiness, and in other ways. The highly committed segment of the populace — the "hidden saints," if you will — account for only about one-tenth of the population, but their influence is far out of proportion to their numbers.

One should not, of course, downplay the impact of churches and organized religion in our society. Our churches, for example, are probably the most cost-effective institutions in our society. If it were not for churches encouraging pro-social behavior and discouraging anti-social behavior, the financial and other costs to society would be considerably greater than they are today. And one should not forget that organized religion plays a major role in the high level of volunteerism we find in this country, viewed by many as the glue that holds our society together.

Despite the general flatness in religious trends in recent years — at least in terms of attested religious belief or practice — there is solid evidence of two powerful undercurrents in our society:

1. An intensified search for meaning in life, due undoubtedly in part to a rejection of materialism and to what is perceived to be the shallowness of modern life.
2. An intensified search for meaningful relationships, arising out of loneliness. Americans are rediscovering each other, and are joining together, in self-help groups or care groups — people seeking help with physical, psychological, and emotional problems — and spiritual problems, as well.

In the religious world, the small group phenomenon takes the form of prayer and Bible study groups. This trend is a most hopeful one, and will, I believe, help undergird our churches and synagogues. If a small group functions well, it gives people the opportunity to share with others their spiritual journeys, gain support for their faith, bring the Bible into their daily lives, deepen their prayer life, spur evangelism, and empower them to serve others. It has been well said that "faith grows best in the presence of faith."

Small Bible study and prayer fellowship groups can also, I believe, contribute to greater tolerance of each other's religious background. This is highly desirable because there is a great deal of tension, animosity, and lack of civility among denominations and within denominations.

The great challenge facing people of all faiths in the U.S. in the 1990's is to be true to one's own convictions, while being open to those of other people — to be faithful, but to be generous and loving at the same time. The route to better relationships is not, I believe, through a watering-down of one's own beliefs — this is being dishonest to yourself, to the other person, and to God. Yet if we do not love one another at the same time — or at least show a high measure of civility — our theology turns to ashes.

The board of RIAL (Religion in American Life), who relate to each other in faithfulness to their own religious tradition, but in civility and friendship as well, is, in my view, a model of what should exist in society as a whole.

The 1990's could be a period of remarkable renewal in the church in America, but there are giant "ifs":

1. IF churches and synagogues listen, and respond, to the remarkable spiritual breakthroughs people experience, and help these people understand and build upon these experiences.
2. IF people are given the essential tools with which to build their faith. Churches need to emphasize the practical, "how to," aspects of church life.
3. IF churches and synagogues encourage people to make a commitment to reading and studying the Bible. The evidence is clear: Americans are "biblical illiterates."
4. IF churches and synagogues target certain groups in the population:

    a. Those in business and the professions — businessmen, doctors, lawyers, and others — who must constantly make ethical judgments, sometimes life or death decisions. These people are in great need of spiritual nourishment, but often are not receiving it.

    b. Students. Religion should be brought back into the classroom in constitutionally permissable ways, which encourage the study of religion without the promotion of a specific religion. Students receive an incomplete and distorted education if the vital role religion has played in history is ignored.

c. The media. Efforts should be made to inform the media about religion. It will not be an easy task. Columnist Bill Conrad reports that in a survey of 240 top managers of national TV, newspaper and news magazine organizations, the journalists came out at behind the public in spiritual interest. Only 8% of those interviewed go to church or to a synagogue weekly, while 86% seldom or never attend religious services. Half of those have no religious ties.

To summarize:

The 1990's could be an important time of renewal and deepened religious commitment among Americans if the churches and synagogues of our nation:

1. LISTEN to the remarkable religious experiences of people, and help them build upon these experiences.

2. TEACH people how to develop more effective prayer lives, to bring the Bible into their daily lives, and become better trained in other essentials.

3. ENCOURAGE small group fellowship, which serves as a way for people to enter the church community as well as a way to support current members.

4. INSPIRE people to reach out to others in evangelism, but in appropriate and loving ways.

5. TARGET key groups for spiritual nourishment — and religious instruction — people in business and the professions, students, and the media.

If our churches and synagogues are able to reach and equip Americans in the ways described — and there are undoubtedly many other steps that could be suggested — the odds are fairly good that religion in the 1990's will play a broader, but more importantly, a deeper role in society than it has in the past. If we all work together, we stand a good chance of meeting the challenge.

7 in 10 of British Clergy Say Church Can Never Approve of Homosexual Acts

Seven in 10 (71%) of British clergymen believe the Church can never approve of homosexual acts, with 19% disagreeing and the remainder "not sure," as determined by a national survey carried out in December by Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Limited.

The latest findings represent a significant change over the results in 1984 which showed that 61% agreed in not approving homosexual acts. The AIDS controversary and, more recently, the Synod debate on this topic, appear to have influenced clergymen into taking a more conservative line.

Perhaps not surprisingly, single clergy were much more inclined to say that the Church can approve homosexual acts (35%).

Asked what should be done if it were proved that a member of the clergy was an active homosexual, a majority of clergy (61%) thought that they should be given a warning to refrain from any such future activity. Another 21% thought that they should be given a change of work within the Church and 15% thought that they should be removed from office in the Church. A small minority of 6% thought no action should be taken — rising to 12% among the single clergy and the remainder of the clergy thought they should be given some form of counselling.

Gallup interviewed by telephone a representative sample of 309 full-time Church of England clergymen between December 17-21, 1987, with named clergymen randomly selected from Crockfords Directory.

In the sample 28% claimed to be "High Church," 25% Low Church/ Evangelical, and 38% "Middle of the Road." Another 9% refused to be categorized in this way.

How To Reach The Unchurched American

Millions of Americans remain unchurched, and many churches are continuing to experience losses in membership. What can be done to reach the unchurched American? How can present members be kept in the fold?

New light is shed on these pressing questions by the results of a just-completed major survey of the nation's adults, THE UNCHURCHED AMERICAN — 1988. The focus of this survey is on the factors that cause people to leave the church — and those that cause them to return.

This survey, which reports updates of many of the questions asked in the landmark survey of a decade ago (THE UNCHURCHED AMERICAN, 1978), compares and contrasts the attitudes of the churched and unchurched on social changes, lifestyle factors, basic religious beliefs and many other factors that are related to churchlessness.

Special attention in this 1988 survey has been given to the religious experience and needs of blacks and Hispanics in the United States.

The report, based on this important survey, provides full statistical details, comparisons with 1978 results, as well as a special section which offers practical steps to reach the unchurched in your community.

For good, solid, practical information that can help YOU in YOUR ministry — both in reaching new people and in deepening the commitment of the present members of your church — write for the new report, THE UNCHURCHED AMERICAN — 1988.

To place your order write: The Princeton Religion Research Center, P.O. Box 628, Princeton, NJ 08542. Cost per copy is $29.00.

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P.O. Box 310
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Princeton, New Jersey 08542

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